

Wolff making push for performing arts center

County judge says city must stay competitive

W. Scott Bailey

Before Nelson Wolff traded in his mayoral seat in the late 1990s for what would eventually be a successful -- and ongoing -- run as Bexar County judge, he helped stir up a hornets nest by seeking more funding support for the arts.

More than half a decade later, undaunted by the previous backlash, Wolff is seeking a new level of support for the arts from the public and private sectors that would include a world-class performing arts center.

The motive driving that quest, Wolff explains, is the need for San Antonio to keep up with other cities in the quality-of-life race. He says that is the only way the nation's eighth-largest city can truly compete with other cities for more companies like Toyota in the future.

The county judge is not the only person pushing for an improved arts climate and infrastructure. Key local leaders have been involved in some idea-exchanging discussions about the possibility of converting Municipal Auditorium or Freeman Coliseum into a performing arts venue.

Wolff, however, says the better approach would be to pull together the necessary resources from the private and public sectors that would allow for construction of a new, state-of-the-art facility. Such a venue, he contends, could be home to a number of performing arts tenants and touring productions.

"We are reaching a point where we need to seriously consider doing this," says Wolff, who knows that the naysayers are still out there and that the arts have always been an easy target.

Reduce the burden

One group that would greatly benefit from a new performing arts center would be the [San Antonio Symphony](#). That organization has had more important concerns in recent years -- like remaining solvent enough to keep its doors open.

Interim Symphony President and CEO Eddy Aldrete says his organization is making great strides to improve its place in the community and its bottom line. He says a new venue would provide an important boost.

"The Symphony doesn't really have a home," says Aldrete. "That's becoming more of an issue."

Aldrete also says a new venue would allow various users more revenue opportunities, thus creating less of a drain on city coffers.

"This would be a very worthwhile project," says Aldrete. "If you do it right, you can help arts organizations to help themselves."

Aldrete says Wolff deserves credit for keeping the arts front and center and for helping to create a countywide funding source that has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars over a relatively short period of time. That nonprofit program was initially launched as the Bexar County Arts Fund and has since been renamed simply [The Fund](#).

The Fund allows San Antonio employers and their workers to dedicate a small portion of their paychecks toward the local arts. Wolff says a similar program in Cincinnati is now raising nearly \$5 million annually.

"We're working to make that happen here," says Wolff.

This spring, the county will launch a campaign aimed at drawing more attention and dollars to The Fund. Wolff says one of the bigger supporters of the Cincinnati program is Toyota. He is confident that the Japanese automaker will encourage its employees to get involved in San Antonio, too, once its South Side plant is fully operational.

Keeping up

When it comes to the arts, San Antonio is playing a game of catch-up even here in Texas.

Wolff says it's time to narrow the gap between San Antonio and cities like Dallas and Houston.

There are other cities, too, that have added new performing arts centers and theater districts to invigorate their downtowns. Seattle is one example. In that northwestern community, a mix of city, state and private funds were used to construct the Benaroya Concert Hall in the heart of Seattle.

Then there is Milwaukee, which created a downtown theater district in the 1980s that continues to expand.

The district includes the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, a 1960s-era venue that has since been renovated.

It is owned and partially funded by Milwaukee County and is home to the local symphony and ballet.

In late 2003, Milwaukee used local hotel occupancy taxes and bonds to help fund a new \$42 million performing arts center -- the Milwaukee Theater.

That 4,000-seat venue is marketed in conjunction with Milwaukee's convention facilities.

Tim Shields, managing director of the [Milwaukee Repertory Theater](#), says the city's theater district has been a blessing for the arts and for downtown.

"My general belief is that any city which does not have these kinds of things downtown generally becomes a place where people do not want to go. That is why more and more communities now have a vested interest in these kinds of venues."

Says Wolff, "If we can build the arena and a dome, there is no reason we cannot step up and build a first-class center for the ballet, the symphony, the opera."

"A major corporation will move here if you have a good work force," Wolff continues. "But number two on their list is quality of life. The arts are an important part of that. Having a real performing arts center and a thriving arts community is important to what we are trying to do in building and growing this community."

For that to happen, there has to be more community buy-in than what was available in the 1990s.

One group Wolff hopes will step up is the hospitality industry, which aggressively fought the construction of SBC Center because it did not like the idea of contributing hotel occupancy tax revenues toward the project.

Wolff says that industry stands to benefit greatly from an improved arts community and infrastructure.

"It is important to make sure that the hotel and motel folks, the leadership, understand how important this could be to their industry," says Wolff. "Money spent on the arts, for them, is more important than an ad in a newspaper somewhere. It will bring a higher-end tourist."

Henry Feldman, chairman of the [San Antonio Hotel & Lodging Association](#), supports Wolff's forward thinking.

"I think he is right on," says Feldman. "The real needs of this city need to be looked at so that we can remain competitive. That means upgrading our product -- and that includes the arts."

Like Wolff, Aldrete supports a public/private approach.

And both agree that a task force should be formed to address what a performing arts center should look like in San Antonio, who it could benefit and where it should be located.

"A lot may depend on who is the next mayor and if that person would be supportive of something like this," says Wolff. "But there is a lot of private wealth in this community that can really step up and help make this happen."

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